

The True Vine

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This morning I want to start with some Biblical riddles for you to solve.

- Did Eve ever have a date with Adam? No. Genesis 3 only says they had some fruit?
- Who was the greatest financier in the Bible? Noah. He was floating his stock while everyone else was in liquidation.
- Where is the first tennis match mentioned in the Bible? Genesis 9. When Joseph served in Pharaoh's court.
- Where was Solomon's temple located? Some of you probably thought the answer was Jerusalem, but it was on the side of his head.
- Finally, why did Jesus reference grape vines and vineyards so often in His teaching? He's di-vine.

And, with that we turn to the Gospel reading for today.

Today's Gospel includes words that Jesus shared with His disciples on the night in the upper room as they were leaving to go to the Garden of Gethsemane and His betrayal by Judas. He had just finished celebrating the Passover at which He instituted the Sacrament of the Altar. Judas had left, and Jesus was giving His last sermon on that night as He continued to teach them even as they were departing the upper room. Jesus was giving His disciples His last sermon before His death. This reading is from the very middle of His sermon on that night – the night on which He was to be betrayed, tried, and sentenced

to death. But in His teaching, Jesus does not focus on death, but rather on life. He focuses on life, and particularly the life in Him.

Jesus selected as the object of His teaching an old image which dated back into the Old Testament and one that was familiar to His disciples, the grape vine. The disciples and all the people of Israel were familiar with grape vines. In a country where water was not always available or safe to drink, wine was the alternative. Wine required the cultivation of grapes in vineyards. Those of you who study the Bible know that the image of the grapevine is found frequently in the Old Testament. And those images usually point to Israel as a grapevine (Ps 80:8; Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21, Ezekiel).

God had called that grapevine out of Egypt, but His people of Israel did not become the kind of vine God intended. The grapevine of Israel went wild and refused to bear fruit. So, God raised another grapevine in place of the barren one, the failed nation of Israel. Jesus was that new true grape vine. He embodied everything the people of God were supposed to be. So, at the beginning of the reading, Jesus contrasted Himself with Israel by saying He was the true vine. One that represented the intentions of God. The one that rose from the stump of Jesse. The one which borne fruit and brought glory to His Father.

Jesus clearly explained all the imagery to His disciples and us. He was the vine itself – the true vine. God the Father was the vine dresser – the one who owned and tended the vine. We learn that through Jesus, the Holy Spirit gave life to and through the branches to produce the good fruit, the grapes. Notice, the entire Trinity is present in this imagery. And most importantly, so are you and I and all those who believe in Jesus. We are the branches of the grapevine. Jesus described the Triune God and

us in relation to each other. You and I, and all those who believe in Him, are the branches which are expected to bear fruit.

This imagery, a grapevine, should be familiar to us here in Northern Virginia, too. We have 776 acres of vineyards in Loudoun County and each acre is capable of supporting about 400 vines. Those vineyards produced 674 tons of grapes in 2018 and over 1,000 tons of grapes in 2019. If you drive north of Leesburg on US 15 you see the Fabboli Vineyards on your right. Travel south of Leesburg on US 15 you pass the Williwocroft Vineyard. Go west on Route – 7 and you find the Bluemont Vineyard. Travel northwest, up Route 9, and you find the Sunset Hill, Breaux, and Hillsborough Vineyards. And going west along US – 50 you pass the Chrysalis and Cana Vineyards, just to name a few.

And a grape vine estimated to be 400 years old, known as the Mother Vine, is located about 300 miles southeast of here in Manteo, Virginia, south of Virginia Beach on Roanoke Island. It is believed to be the oldest grape vine in all of North America, planted by either Croatan Native Americans or settlers of the Lost Colony. Some have suggested that this grape vine is the “mother” of all vines for scuppernong grapes, North Carolina’s state fruit. In 1957, Jack and Estelle Wilson bought the property on which this Mother Vine lived. Its tangled branches occupied two acres. They trimmed it and lifted its branches to make room for a house and the vine still occupies a third of their front yard in Manteo, stretching 30 feet by 120 feet.

If you were to look at the eight verses of our reading from St. John, you will find that the reading hinges on two words. Jesus repeats these words multiple times in the reading. Let’s see if you can see those two words as you look at the text. Do you see

them? Jesus uses the word **“fruit”** five times in these eight verses. And He uses the word **“abide”** seven times. Everything in the reading hangs on those two words. The expected outcome for the branches is fruit and the means for the expected outcome to occur – abiding in Jesus. If God is the wine dresser – the one who planted the vine and tends to it, and Jesus is the vine, and the fruit comes to life through the Holy Spirit, then, the two remaining actions are left to the branches – you and me. Those two actions are to abide in the vine, Jesus, and to bear fruit to the glory of God the Father, and to that we belong to Him.

Everything about the imagery here points to the end product, the fruit. The other characters, the members of the Trinity, act to make that possible. God is the vine dresser, the one who tends the vine. He is more than just a mere farmer. As the vinedresser, just as vinedressers in a vineyard here on earth, He maintains the branches of the vine for years. He comes to know each part of the vine and its branches in a personal way. He is like a shepherd with his sheep. His goal is to cause the branches to produce fruit, more fruit, much fruit, according to Jesus.

The branches, you and I, get our sustenance from the vine, Jesus. Through our faith in Him and what He has done, we are fed and nourished so that we bear fruit. Jesus says that nourishment comes from His word in verse three. He had just instituted the Lord’s Supper in the upper room and in it He provided a means of nourishment to the branches in His very body and blood. Jesus tells us that without this nourishment, this sustenance from Him, a branch will quickly die. And a branch that is dead does not provide fruit, so it is removed and burned because grape vines have only one use or purpose – to provide fruit. The wood is useless for any other purpose than to

be burned in a fire. So, Jesus emphasizes, over and over again, that the branches must abide in Him. His reiteration of the word abide shows how critically important it is to be connected to Jesus as His disciples. It is only through Him that we are able to produce fruit. Without Him, we, the branches, not only die, but are barren. And being barren results in the vinedresser using his pruning shears to cut off a barren branch which is not productive.

Jesus used the Greek word "AIRO" that can mean "takes away" as in cutting off with a pruning knife but also can mean "to lift up." Sometimes the vinedresser lifts up or props up a branch, so it does grow down to the ground and become decayed and rot. By lifting it up, the vinedresser keeps the branch productive and connected to the vine. But you need to notice that as we live in Jesus, the vine, God the Father, our vinedresser, prunes even the healthy and productive branches. This pruning is done so that the branch not only continues to produce, but produces even more. You all know that plants, if left on their own, will grow randomly in every direction. The branches often seek their own purposes and don't put their energy into producing fruit. When this happens in our lives, we "branches of the vine" need to be pruned. We need to have the things that are taking us away from our purpose of producing fruit. The vinedresser then prunes us, and this is not always pleasant but painful. As branches, our vinedresser sees what is best for us, sees how we are using our strength, and may see that our purposes are not His and He prunes us. By His love for us He redirects us to His purpose of bearing fruit. So, sometimes God lifts us up and directs us to our purpose and sometimes prunes us and often, the pruning is painful. We don't always get what we want. Things don't always work out the way we'd planned. Yet, through it all, we become stronger and more resilient. And,

ironically, we find that our strength is as much a product of our failures as our successes; that it's not the pleasures of life, but the pain, that proves to be the mettle of strong character and lasting faith. And this makes us more fruitful and more connected to the vine of Jesus.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the vinedresser grafts more branches on the vine through Holy Baptism. Our loving Father, the vinedresser, watches over the vine and its branches to be sure that it produces fruit. According to His will, He prunes the branches to make them healthy and strong and fertilizes them and waters them to see that they grow. The vine and the branches enjoy the protection and providence of the vine dresser knowing that it is His expectation that they produce fruit. So, He expects them to bear that fruit to bring glory to His name.

And what is that fruit of the vine that come through us from Jesus by the power faith? The answer is given by St. Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. He tells us, ***“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*** This is the fruit which the branches are expected to produce from the vine, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit who is present in the life of a Christian that we show the fruit of the vine, Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit's job to conform us to the image of Christ, making us more like Him. And in doing so, to produce the fruit that He wishes us to produce as the branches of His vine. His divine vine. So, if the branch decides to go its own way and not produce fruit or produce fruit that is bitter and unpleasant, the vinedresser takes actions to change it. If you look at the vineyards around us, you can see this imagery.

Every branch, wants to grow in its own way. Every human being enters this world as a branch that deserves to be burned, but the Holy Spirit works to graft us into Jesus Christ and bring us to life. When Jesus tells us to abide in Him, He is simply telling us to remain in Him. He is telling us to live on the nutrition He supplies. He is telling us that He is the life, and He is all the life that we need.

Jesus tells us that those who abide in Him are alive and are able to produce fruit that represents Him. When we do so, Jesus promised that we would have a direct connection to Him through prayer. And by our faithful fruit production He will answer our prayers with whatever is needed by us. But, even more important, through Jesus, we glorify God as we show that as branches of the Divine vine, we bear His fruit.

And that brings us to our mission statement. We are all branches in a relationship with Jesus, the vine. When we bear the fruit of the vine, Jesus, we are showing our connection to Jesus and show His love to others. That in turn allows the Holy Spirit to graft more branches on the Divine vine and bring glory to God the Father.

You are a branch of the vine, and we in the Church are branches together. You are a branch among many branches. God has made us for community and conversation, with God and with one another. Fruit-bearing that glorifies God includes the good work of treasuring one another in the Church, regarding one another as precious children of the heavenly Father, and brothers and sisters in Christ. Nurture the connections between you and fellow church members. Weep with them. Rejoice with them. Encourage them. Nurture the connections between you and your family members, and between you and your friends. They are not only friends and family; they are also the

redeemed of God. Nurture the connections you have with people outside the faith and the church. The Spirit might draw them to the Divine Vine, Jesus Christ, through your fruitful living, through your words, and actions.

So, I ask you, today, how are you doing? Do you see yourself as a branch closely attached and abiding in Jesus? Are you bearing abundant fruit in His name? These are not riddles or trick questions. You know the answers and so does your God.

Fellow branches, I bring you these words today as part of the fruit of the Divine vine, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit and to the Glory of God the Father. Amen.